

What's Cool Online? Teenagers Render Verdict



The Coke Studios Web site was designed to appeal to teenagers as a place to meet online, hold chats and make their own music.

By **JULIE BOSMAN**

Published: September 29, 2005

MARKETERS spend a lot of time figuring out what teenagers want. Teenagers are their most desirable and fickle demographic, the arbiters of cool who set trends, influence brand health and part with their discretionary income most freely.

Readers' Opinions

[Forum: Media, Advertising and Marketing](#)

So as part of Advertising Week 2005, interactive advertising agencies tried to answer the question last Tuesday of what teenagers want. The Interactive Advertising Bureau gathered 10 teenagers onstage at the Millennium Broadway Hotel to informally evaluate the creativity and effectiveness of three teenager-oriented interactive marketing campaigns, all before an audience of hundreds of industry executives.

So what do teenagers want? As one might expect, they want to have some fun. They want to customize products, they want to play games and they want to socialize. The online campaigns, created by three marketing agencies promoting [Nike](#), [Coca-Cola](#) and the video game Halo 2, focused on the selling points for teenagers.

Nike iD products embodied customization with a Web site created by R/GA, an agency in New York. It created a "build your own" concept that allows users to design and customize sneakers with a variety of styles, colors and materials.

As a final flourish of customization, users can add a word or number to be sewn on the heel of the shoe. (This feature became briefly prominent in 2001, when Nike denied a request from an enterprising graduate student to emblazon the word "sweatshop" on his shoes.)

"The fact that you actually get to do it yourself is good," said James Del Guidice, 18, who nonetheless was wearing black Converse Chuck Taylors. "I definitely think the more custom, the better."

Mildred Arteaga, 17, said, "Everybody is looking to be different."

Coca-Cola's campaign was met with less enthusiasm. Designed by the Atlanta-based agency Studiocom, Coke Studios is an online chat game that encourages visitors to create their own music, make friends and decorate an interactive personal studio. Since its creation in 2002, the Coke Studios Web site has logged more than seven million registered users, a large percentage in their early teens.

The teenagers on the panel, who ranged from 15 to 18 years old, were not impressed. "I thought it was a really good idea if I was, like, 12," said Haley Ratner, 15.

"The cartoons reminded me of those kids who dress up like vampires," said Jill Moskowitz, 18.

The final demonstration was by AKQA, a San Francisco advertising agency that created a Web site previewing the video game Halo 2. The agency converted the game to an invented language they called Covenant, hoping to appeal to the teenage obsession with game playing.

It paid off: game enthusiasts who visited the site deciphered the language in less than a day, and the site attracted more than 140,000 visitors in a weekend, the agency said.

Interactive agencies say that they are more in touch with teenagers than traditional media agencies, and are armed with statistics about teenage Internet usage. According to research by Studiocom, teenagers are online more often than any other demographic.

Not only have 97 percent of teenagers used the Internet, the agency said, but they spend more time online than they do watching TV. Interactive advertising usually appeals to teenagers, the agency said, because it engages their desire to control what they buy. For marketers, it allows advertising to masquerade as a game and engage the consumer.

"This is advertising, but it's not behaving like advertising," said Nick Law, the vice president of visual design at R/GA in New York. "It's behaving more like a demo."

And no other group is as interested in controlling the product as the teenage market, he said. "I think what distinguishes how teenagers interact with the media in contrast to us older folks is that

they want control over the media they consume," Mr. Law said. "The possibilities of self-expression are endless."

Capturing the teenage demographic is a primary concern for marketers looking to stamp their product with a cool image. "They're crazy about the teenagers - that's one of the brand health measures that companies look at now," said Juan Pablo Gnecco, the chief executive of Studiocom. "If you can be cool, then you're going to be talked about, and that's going to produce results."

Grant McDonald, a founding partner of North Castle Partners, an advertising and communications firm that specializes in youth marketing and advertising, moderated.

"This is a very tough audience," he said of teenagers as the session ended. "They're so sophisticated, more than anyone else. It takes a lot to turn them on."

After the teenagers disbanded, Mr. Gnecco winced at the reaction to Coke Studios. "They destroyed me," he said.